

Government courses taught in Texas colleges in the 1940s omitted the mechanics of the poll tax system. We smooth-cheeked, clear-eyed innocents, so naïve we blushed at the sight of our faces in a rearview mirror, were not told that the names on the voter rolls did not always match the persons marking the ballot.

My education was too come later on a quail hunt at the ranch. One of the Boss's pals said that in 1934 he voted in two counties one July primary election. He cast a first vote in an old courthouse close to his ranch. Then he drove over to an adjoining county seat to spend the rest of the day in a back alley beer joint allowed to be open because of the bartender's influence with the sheriff. (Texas law then forbade the sale of alcoholic beverages during polling hours, and might have prohibited the consumption of same.)

All went well until midday. "The beef," he said, "tasted especially refreshing." County level politics in Depression days generated plenty of heat and passion. Wages were cheap; a county sheriff might draw a hundred a month counting extra stipend for feeding prisoners compared to the conversion of days into equal dollar amounts the cowboys drew.

Just as a fresh draft hit the bar, the incumbent sheriff opened the door, adjusted his eyes to the darkness, and said: "You. You get up to the basement of the courthouse and vote for me, or I'll throw you in jail every time you come over here." Too frightened to object, he rushed over to the courthouse basement.

Without asking his name, the election judge handed him a ballot. The only words exchanged were the judge telling a clerk that for all he knew the fellow was new in town.

The way the sheriff and the election judge rigged voting, the new citizen was ordained by fitting him to a name on the over-65 exemption list belonging to a elderly person either deceased or too ill to vote. Absentee boxes were another advantage for incumbents as the county clerk, most often the chum of the office holders, handled the ballots in his or her office.

Be hard to say for sure whether the next charge of buying poll taxes for illegal aliens at two dollars and fifty cents a pop influenced or induced voters to vote in the Shortgrass Country, as campaign chests in those awful times were closer to being match boxes than "chests."

The reason I am so vague on corruption is that the times I ran for office in Irion County, my opponents held such strong leads that if they bothered to be dishonest,

they were incurable crooks. I never felt I'd been cheated. In those days, folks had good instincts and keen judgement, sound-minded and discriminating judges of character hard to hoodwink. I sure couldn't run on my record, as all I'd ever accomplished at age 26 was a talent for marking lambs and flanking calves.

Running for office and working at the state capitol in college, however, left a deep interest in politics. Last week, for example, San Angelo fielded a candidate for mayor the exact age I was when I ran for county judge. I wanted to go vote for the boy, as he was close to my grandchildren's generation. I wanted a preview on what it'd be like when my grandsons started writing home for money to run for office instead of, say, funding to reimburse the state for guard rails knocked down on Saturday night.

Chances of voting in the wool capital were not good. Voting machines are sensitive to being cranked by outsiders. Too, all my contacts clever enough to help pull off a dual citizenship act were graybeards in crash courses trying to repent and be ready for Judgement Day. Only one I dared to ask was so obstinate, I asked him if he ever heard of the great American custom of "splitting your vote."

I waited until nearly closing time to vote in the city and school board race in Mertzon. The clerk asked for

identification. Before extracting my billfold, I told her loud enough for the whole room to hear that I hadn't had to show my driver's license awhile ago when I voted in San Angelo.

The announcement sure threw a pall on the pickup sticks game the election crew was playing with lead pencils. I marked the choices in short order. The sound of my pencil scratching against the paper resounded in the stillness. Been a time in our history that sort of humor would have drawn an investigation by the Rangers. Helps sometimes to be known as an eccentric.

Sunday's paper showed the boy winning the mayor's race by a big margin. I didn't bother to see who won at Mertzon. Those long-ago sheriffs were lucky that driver's licenses were yet to have photographs. I am thankful I don't have to run for office today in such a stuffy culture.